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RR RUEHDBU RUEHLN RUEHVK RUEHYG  
DE RUEHYE #1302/01 3031410  
ZNR UUUUU ZZH  
R 301410Z OCT 07  
FM AMEMBASSY YEREVAN  
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 6557  
INFO RUCNCIS/CIS COLLECTIVE

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 YEREVAN 001302

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DEPARTMENT FOR EUR/PPD, EUR/CARC

E.O. 12958; N/A

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SUBJECT: MEDIA REACTION: COVERAGE OF FORMER PRESIDENT'S RALLY  
SKEWED

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SUMMARY  
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11. (SBU) Almost all Armenian broadcast media and much of the printed press failed to report fully and accurately the most significant event so far in the presidential campaign. On October 26, 2007, several opposition parties organized a rally in Liberty Square at which former president Levon Ter-Petrossian (LTP) made the much anticipated formal announcement of his candidacy and condemned, at length, what he considered a corrupt presidential administration that, in addition to its other flaws, is blocking progress on a settlement in Nagorno Karabakh (see septel). Most TV stations referred to the event but, with only one exception, refrained from reporting the content of the former president's speech, choosing instead to air negative images from his 1990s administration and critical comments by President Kocharian. Notably, semi-oppositional Yerkir television offered balanced coverage. Only a few opposition newspapers provided full coverage of the rally and Ter Petrossian's speech. Official and pro-government newspapers provided either bland coverage or none at all. END SUMMARY.

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A NEW MEMBER OF THE "STREET OPPOSITION"  
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12. (SBU) Yerkir Media TV, (run by the Dashnaktsutiun party), was the only TV channel which attempted to show the thousands of people that turned out for the opposition rally. Other TV stations, like government-run Public TV (H1), showed only a sparse crowd apparently filmed before the event had gotten fully underway. The only quote from Ter-Petrossian was the announcement of his candidacy. There followed a much longer airing of historical clips showing the hardships people endured during the LTP years. Many viewers were struck by the common format, (short announcement of candidacy, lengthy negative clips) and the similarity of the images used. Public TV opined during its prime time news that LTP had now become a member of the "street opposition," adding that it seemed he had nothing to say other than recounting the "accomplishments" of his former administration. Armenia TV chose not to air the rally, preferring instead to air interviews with those people on the street who expressed their dislike for the former president.

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"USE YOUR RIGHT TO BE INFORMED"  
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13. (SBU) While opposition HAYAKAKAN ZHAMANAK, ARAVOT and 168 ZHAM newspapers noted that an unprecedented number of people participated in the rally, the pro-government HAYOTS ASHKHAR showed a half empty square on its front page. HAYKAKAN ZHAMANAK informed its readers that, for two days, Armenian authorities waged a "black PR" campaign against LTP. Regional authorities threatened employees working in government agencies that, if they dared to participate in the rally,

they would suffer the consequences. Mini-van drivers were reportedly told not to work on October 26 to prevent people from coming from outside of Yerevan. The author of the article opines that one could easily understand how nervous and tense the authorities are by observing the number of policemen located in the square and the extremely negative reports about LTP on the TV channels. The similarity of the reports made the author suspect that TV stations had received instructions on covering the event from the same source.

¶4. (SBU) Aram Abrahamian, Chief Editor of the daily ARAVOT, in an editorial titled "An Event," had harsh criticism for Armenia's TV stations, accusing them of having forgotten the basic principles of journalism and, without quoting Ter-Petrossian's speech, choosing to broadcast comments denouncing his administration.

¶5. (SBU) Opposition newspaper 168 ZHAM specifically criticized Armenia TV, whose program host usually signs off saying to viewers, "Use your right to be informed." The paper mocks the host for failing to reveal how viewers should do this, given that in his view, both Armenia TV and other TV channels are tightly controlled by the authorities and provide biased and incorrect coverage of developments. The author argues that the best way to exercise that right is "to switch off our TV sets and switch on our radio sets to listen to Radio Liberty, the only mass media outlet that gives impartial coverage of events."

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WHOEVER HAS FORGOTTEN, WE'LL REMIND THEM...  
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¶6. (SBU) While giving minimal coverage to the opposition rally, virtually all broadcast media outlets provided extensive coverage to President Kocharian's remarks concerning LTP's political comeback. He is cited saying, "I think it would be naive to think that people

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have forgotten the time of the Armenian National Movement's tenure. Anyone who has forgotten, we'll remind them." "It is obvious that ANM is responsible for the destruction of the Armenian economy. Now, when they see the economy is being restored, they think that new opportunities have been created for stealing."

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COMMENT  
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¶7. (SBU) Newspapers reach only a tiny segment of the population (mostly the political class). No newspaper has a circulation of over 6,000. Polls have shown that whereas 99% of the population relies on TV for its news, with state-run Public TV (H1) holding the dominant share, only a third of that number obtains information from the printed press or radio.

PENNINGTON